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ABSTRACT

To examine the perceptions of superintendents regarding the issues involved in teacher strikes and how they see strikes affecting principals, students, school boards, and themselves, a list of the districts throughout the United States that had experienced a strike during the years 1984 through 1987 was obtained from the Government Employee Relations Report. Questionnaires were sent to 135 superintendents of these school districts; the response rate was 42.2 percent. The superintendents perceived that the principals, who should be the key leaders in the school system, were put in the position of upholding policies that they did not formulate and mending fences with the teachers who struck over those very policies. The same policies and ways of operating that helped precipitate the strikes remained unchanged in the majority of districts after the strikes. Superintendents, who helped formulate the policies and ways of operating in the districts were overwhelmingly unaffected by the strikes and remained in their positions after the strikes. Teachers were perceived as striking primarily over monetary issues, perhaps due to the collective bargaining processes in place. Yet district policies and operating procedures may well be the actual--but hidden--issues in strikes and perhaps it is the state laws, governing schools and issues that can be bargained that hide the real problem areas as teachers perceive them. These results indicate that the role superintendents play in a district needs reevaluation. (KM)

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REFLECTIONS OF A STRIKE AS SEEN THROUGH
THE EYES OF SUPERINTENDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This article looks at how superintendents perceive the main issues involved in teacher strikes and how they seek strikes affecting principals, students, school boards and themselves. It also looks at which community groups are active in strikes and the methods these groups use to gain access into the strike settlement process. The question of whether district policies and operating procedures are changed due to strikes is examined. Questionnaires were sent to 135 school districts throughout the United States which had experienced strikes during the years 1984-1987. Superintendents in 57 of these districts responded and their responses are the basis for this article. Results indicate the key role superintendents play in a district needs to be re-evaluated and the way district policies and operating procedures are formulated need to be examined. The impact of strikes on school boards also needs a closer look.

REFLECTIONS OF A STRIKE AS SEEN THROUGH THE EYES OF SUPERINTENDENTS

How effective are strikes? "They are not effective at all! They erode the morale of principals. They drive away school board members. They force parents to be reactive and go outside the traditional process used to gain access to the educational system." "Students?" "No, it doesn't affect them much at all! Just a little time away from school." "Do strikes change anything?" "No! Policies and operating procedures stay just the way they were." "It certainly doesn't affect me!" "Principals, though, are caught right in the middle." "Oh, and by the way, no matter what teachers say, money is the issue they really strike over!"

These are the perceptions of superintendents throughout the U.S. whose school districts have experienced teacher strikes. Their responses were gathered in a study conducted by an Eastern Washington University Department of Education research team.

The respondents to this study saw that principals, who should be the key leaders in the school system, were put in the position of upholding policies they did not formulate and mending fences with teachers who struck over those policies. The same policies and ways of operating that helped precipitate the strikes remained unchanged in the majority of districts after the strikes. Superintendents, who helped formulate the policies and ways of operating in the districts, were overwhelmingly unaffected by the strikes and remained in their positions after the strikes. Community groups, the most active being parents, had to resort to the political process in order to gain

access to participate in the resolution of strike issues instead of having access to the school system while the policies were being formed. School board members, who have the legal responsibility for the policies and procedures used by the district, were refusing to run or were not re-elected in 1 out of 5 districts. Students, who are the people directly affected by the policies and ways of operating in the district, were perceived by superintendents as being unaffected, yet strike literature shows that a percentage of students opt to attend other schools during strikes and 13.4 percent of students in one district dropped out of school during a strike. Teachers, who say they want policies and ways of operating that will benefit children, and who say they would never "strike just for the money", were perceived, perhaps due to the collective bargaining process in place, as striking primarily for salaries and fringe benefits instead of student-related issues.

A list of school districts throughout the United States that had experienced a strike during the years 1984-1987 was obtained from the Government Employee Relations Report. Questionnaires were then sent out to the superintendents of 135 school districts and 42.2 percent of the superintendents returned the questionnaire (57/135 districts). The results of these questionnaires are the basis for this article and provide a unique opportunity to look at strikes and their aftermaths through the eyes of superintendents.

Most recent literature on strikes deals with the collective bargaining process or how boards can prepare for strikes. The questionnaire sent out by the Department of Education chose to examine

the issues in strikes and what happens to those people directly involved in strikes rather than the mechanics of collective bargaining or preparation for strikes.

Here are the results of this survey about those who were directly affected by strikes and the key issues in strikes, as seen through the eyes of superintendents.

How Do Superintendents Perceive . . . The Effects
Of Strikes On Principals?

This is an area in which there appears to be a dearth of research, yet principals have the unenviable task of being in the middle during a strike and having to uphold administrative policy while directly dealing with teachers during and after a strike.

In one middle school study (Zigarmi & Sinclair, 1979) it was found that after the strike "the principal spent less time in classrooms, in the hall, and in the faculty lounge but instead spent large amounts of time in his office."

This survey found the following effects on principals: 1) more work was required of them as they had to mend fences, 2) they felt beat down as they worked the hardest to overcome the actions of others yet gained nothing, 3) they became bitter, 4) stress took its toll, 5) some couldn't wait to retire and 6) professional sorrow was felt. On the positive side, in one district principals became closer and realized they could accomplish more than they thought and in one district principals felt they became better.

Interestingly enough, in 33.33 percent of the districts, superintendents perceived no effect of strikes on principals.

Since principals feel the effects of upholding policies they do not make, the question arises as to the role the principals should have in policy formation as they are directly affected by those policies and know the concerns of the people directly impacted by the policies (teachers, students and parents). Principals appear to be the forgotten people in strikes.

How Do Superintendents Perceive . . . Policies And Ways
Of Operating After Strikes?

In this survey, an astonishing 82.53 percent of the districts surveyed indicated no change in policies or operating procedures after a strike. It would appear that district policies and operating procedures would change after a strike as obviously the communication processes and organizational processes in districts did not avert strikes.

Of the 17.46 percent of the districts who did indicate a change in operating procedures or policies, some interesting changes were noted. One district said teachers are now treated like professionals capable of independent thought. In one district the board insisted on a monthly meeting with union leaders. Later administrators were added to the meetings and many teacher complaints were handled at these meetings. Another district formed two giant committees and teachers have been added to the superintendent's cabinet. These responses are

pro-active and positive, even though they are in the minority.

The laws that states have (collective bargaining) allow mainly monetary issues, such as salaries and fringe benefits, to be bargained. The real issues behind strikes may be the district policies and operating procedures that don't change.

How Do Superintendents Perceive . . . Themselves
As Affected By Strikes?

Contrary to popularly held beliefs, superintendents are not usually the focal issues in strikes. Ninety-two percent (92.06%) of superintendents did not leave their districts after strikes. In fact, only 5/57 superintendents (8.77 percent) did leave the district due to the strike. One interesting fact discovered was that 14/57 superintendents (24.56 percent) had one year or less on the job.

School bureaucracy may become so entrenched that it isolates superintendents from the people and issues involved and, as indicated in this survey, causes them to see themselves as being unaffected by strikes.

How Do Superintendents Perceive . . . Community Groups
Participating In Strikes?

During a strike community groups develop a reactive method to influence strikes rather than seeking to use traditional or established lines of communication between schools and the community.

Education and educators like to think of themselves as "being above politics." However, in a strike, educational politics are present. "Educational politics are the behaviors or sets of interactions of interested groups, professional educators, and elected officials through which authoritative allocations of educational resources (valued things) are made and implemented by society (Easton, 1971). Competition between these groups leads to the formation of policies which hypothetically satisfy the plural public interests. In theory the public interest is to be protected by the elected board members who employ professional administrators to negotiate and carry out the contracts. When private citizen interest groups try to influence the strike settlement process, they usually do not have a scheduled election whereby they can be heard. To be recognized these groups must gain access to participate. Structural (direct-institutional) and political (indirect-personal) are two types of access which interest groups seek to become participants" (Lemke, 1982).

The community, or interest groups, that took part in strikes in this survey were churches, the P.T.A., the League of Women voters, students, and parents.

In 16.12 percent of the districts the church took part in the strike. The role that the church played was predominately one of mediator or counselor. Some churches offered to provide space for meetings. In some cases ministers were on the picket lines.

Two groups who are traditionally associated with education, played minor roles in the strikes. The League of Women voters was active in

3.22 percent of strikes and the P.T.A. was active in only 12.90 percent of strikes.

Students used the political process to influence strikes and were active in 46.77 percent of the strikes. Picketing was the most commonly used method of influence, followed by letters to the editor, T.V. appearances, attending board meetings, marching, and attending rallies.

The most active group was the parents. They were active in 51.62 percent of all strikes. Their influence was political. The most commonly used method was picketing, followed by attending board meetings, calling public meetings, and written and verbal participation in the strikes.

This survey showed a keen interest by various groups in affecting a settlement to strikes. The exact measure of their influence on ending any strike is unknown, but they are present and should serve as reminders that there are demands for more direct control of the educational process by outside affected groups.

If there is a demand for more direct control of the educational process during a strike, is that demand present during the normal operations of a district? In a study of a strike in Sudbury, Ontario (Radecki & Evans, 1982) parents were asked about "their input into the school system." Only 6.1 percent belonged to an education-related association or organization. Asked why they did not belong to a school association, 18.3 percent said no such association in their school existed; 22.0 percent had no spare time; 17.1 percent had never heard of an association for secondary parents; 11.0 percent

gave a variety of responses; and 13.4 percent did not answer." These answers, coupled with the results of this survey which indicate little or no involvement by the P.T.A. in strikes, behoove those involved in education to look at how parents can become actively involved in the structural process of school policy formation before crisis situations, such as strikes, occur. P.T.A.s do not provide the participatory structure for parents to be actively involved in policy formation. At this time, parents play no active role in schools during normal operations of a school district with regard to policy formation.

How Do Superintendents Perceive . . . The Effects
Of A Strike On School Board Members?

School districts need strong board members but how can they attract them if strikes negatively impact qualified people who are willing to run? This survey showed some districts had board members who were subject to recall or were taken to court. In one district it was stated that businessmen won't serve on the board as they are afraid it will hurt their business.

Of those districts responding, 9.5 percent lost board members in re-elections and 11.1 percent had board members choose not to run again. This means that in 1 out of 5 districts (20.6 %), board members were lost due to strikes. This is quite a turnover.

How board turnover affects a district was dramatically illustrated in San Jose, California (Cramer, 1984). San Jose had a strike in

1980. The next year 3 out of 5 board members decided not to run. This left a leadership vacuum. "Facing a hostile and suspicious teacher union after the elections was a school board comprising the board member who had leaked information to the union, a member with only two years' experience and three school board novices." The board accepted the recommendations of a state-appointed fact finder. (A 9.6 % salary increase, followed by two yearly increases of approximately 6% were approved.) This was more than the district could afford. The board tried to freeze teacher salaries in 1982 to their 1981-92 level. The union fought this and went to an arbitrator. The arbitrator ruled that the board had to give teachers the raise. The district then declared bankruptcy under Chapter 9. This angered the community and 3 out of 5 board members were voted out. As Superintendent Barna said, "Selfishness, stupidity, a lack of leadership. Any one of these elements can rip a school district apart. Mix the three together - and toss in a lack of funds and some bad timing - and you have the outcome of the bankruptcy of the San Jose Schools."

How Do Superintendents Perceive . . . The Effect
Of A Strike On Students?

Thirty percent of superintendents indicated that strikes had no effect on students. Of the effects listed, the most predominate were: 1) having to make up days in June (this was seen as a hardship), 2) confusion and 3) disrespect for teachers. The popular viewpoint,

however, is that students are directly and negatively impacted.

In Sudbury, Ontario (Radecki & Evans, 1982) parents were asked what their children did during the strike. "Twenty-five point six percent (25.6%) said they 'did nothing', 12.2 percent said their children worked and 37.7 percent said their children were enrolled in other schools, studied at home, or in the library. Thirteen point four percent (13.4%) said their children dropped out during the strike. About half the dropouts returned to school by 1981." This indicates that schools are losing a percentage of students to other schools or districts during strikes and are also losing some students that are at-risk and, due to the strike, never return to school.

Superintendents have not calculated the hidden effects of strikes such as students opting to go to other schools or districts and students who drop out.

How Do Superintendents Perceive . . . The Key Issues In Strikes?

Teachers vow that they would never strike "just for the money" but the results of two previous surveys and this survey seem to indicate otherwise. The following chart illustrates the key issues found in studies by Radecki & Evans (1982), Gasworth et al (1982) and this study. It is interesting to note that the issues of money and fringe benefits are the top issues listed in each study.

The Key Issues In Strikes

<u>Radecki & Evans (1982)</u> (One district)	<u>Gasworth et al (1982)</u> (New Jersey)	<u>E.W.U. Survey (1989)</u> (Nationwide)
1. Renumeration	1. Salaries	1. Salaries
2. Staffing	2. Fringe Benefits	2. Fringe Benefits
3. Workload	3. Class Size	3. Class Size
4. Employee Protections	4. Length of School Year	4. Work Year

As mentioned earlier in this article, perhaps the state laws governing schools and issues that can be bargained, hide the real issues which may be those regarding district policies and operating procedures which don't seem to be changed. Superintendents see only money items as being the key issues in a strike. Due to this perception superintendents do not see district policy and operating procedures as needing to change. This view may be the Trojan Horse hiding the real issues leading to strikes and may well cause the downfall of communications between the district and union regarding what teachers really see the problem areas as being.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

Superintendents perceive themselves to be the only group who are not impacted by strikes and remain stable. School board members come and go. Students, as a result of the strike, go to other schools or districts and may drop out. Parents are active during a strike yet do

not avail themselves of the opportunity to use traditional structures, such as the P.T.A., during normal operations of a district. Teachers are perceived as striking over monetary issues due to the collective bargaining procedures in place, yet districts policies and operating procedures may well be the hidden issues in strikes. Principals seem to be the forgotten people in strikes. They have to deal with teachers after strikes while upholding policies they did not make. District policies and operating procedures remain unchanged.

What role do superintendents have after strikes if they indeed are the people who remain stable and are basically unaffected? Do they have the responsibility to work with teachers, principals, and parents to develop district policies and operating procedures that are acceptable to all groups? If there is collaboration and a cooperative effort in formulating district policies might teacher strikes become a thing of the past? Would there be high board turnover if the policies and operating procedures school boards adopted were the result of collaboration between teachers, principals, and parents?

This survey provided a unique format to examine a strike through the eyes of Superintendents. It also serves as a springboard for superintendents to examine their role in bringing about consensus among teachers, principals, and parents regarding district policy and operating procedures and their advisory role to school boards as to what the best policies and operating procedures are.

Where do superintendents go from here? Education is now a prime concern in the political and business worlds. Politicians, business people, principals, parents and teachers all want a voice in helping

shape an educational system that will lead students to a future they can deal with and shape. Superintendents must be the leaders to respond to these powerful forces and include them in the important policy and operating decisions that school districts face today. (Educational policy decisions that result from a collaborative effort between business people, politicians, parents, principals and teachers.) Will superintendents be the force for the changes that are coming or will they, in the words of a song, say to the people who want to be a part of the decision making "I hear you knocking but you can't come in"?

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